

Assessing the Relationship between Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model and Ideological and Political Theory Courses on Meaning of Life among Chinese University Students: A Quantitative Study

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigates the relationship between the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model, ideological and political theory courses, and the meaning of life among Chinese university students. A sample of 90 participants from three universities (Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University) completed measures assessing educational effectiveness, ideological endorsement, and perceptions of the meaning of life. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation analysis were conducted to examine the relationships among variables. Additionally, comparisons were made across universities, genders, and age groups. The results revealed significant positive correlations between the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory, as well as between ideological endorsement and perceptions of the meaning of life. Both the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory emerged as significant predictors of meaning in life, with age also playing a significant role. Furthermore, mediation analysis indicated indirect effects of the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory on the relationship between ideological education and perceptions of the meaning of life. Peking University consistently exhibited the highest mean scores across

variables, suggesting potential differences in educational approaches and ideological climates among universities. Gender differences were non-significant, but age emerged as a significant predictor of existential perceptions. This research enriches our comprehension of the intricate relationship between educational encounters, ideological frameworks, and existential viewpoints among college students.

Keywords: Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model, Ideological Education, Marxist Theory, Meaning of Life, University Students.

Introduction

The quest for meaning in life constitutes a fundamental element of human existence that surpasses cultural, geographical, and temporal confines (Martela, F., & Steger, 2016). From ancient philosophical inquiries to modern psychological research, understanding the essence of life and one's purpose within it has been a central theme of intellectual discourse (Seghezze, 2009; Schwartz, 2012). In the contemporary context, this existential quest intertwines with the educational sphere, particularly within the realm of ideological and political theory courses offered in university settings (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2013).

Philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, have long grappled with questions regarding the nature of existence Gergen (2001), ethics, and the pursuit of a meaningful life in Chinese culture (Chan, 2013). These traditions continue to influence Chinese society Hammerstrom (2016) and its educational systems Liu (2011), shaping individuals' perspectives on life's purpose and societal values. Furthermore, the Chinese government's emphasis on ideological education underscores the significance of exploring how educational curricula impact students' existential outlooks (Wang et al., 2007).

Ideological and political theory courses represent a cornerstone of higher education in China Littlejohn (2021), providing students with a structured framework to understand political systems, historical narratives, and ideological paradigms (Yang et al., 2018). These courses not only impart knowledge but also mold students' worldviews, beliefs, and attitudes toward society (Shan & Guo, 2014) and governance. Given their profound influence, it is essential to examine the broader implications of ideological education, particularly concerning students' perceptions of life's meaning.

Donald Kirkpatrick's seminal work on training evaluation introduced the four-level model for assessing the effectiveness of educational programs (Kirkpatrick, 1994). While the model has traditionally been applied in corporate training contexts, its relevance extends to the evaluation of academic courses and their impact on learners. Of particular interest is Kirkpatrick's fourth level, which focuses on measuring results or broader outcomes, such as changes in behavior, attitudes, or organizational goals. By applying this assessment model to ideological and political theory courses, we can systematically evaluate their influence on students' existential perspectives (Rogers, 2011).

The importance of this study rests in its investigation into how ideological education intersects with the quest for meaning among Chinese university students. As higher education institutions increasingly prioritize holistic development and student well-being Sleeter (2002), understanding how educational experiences shape students' existential outlooks becomes imperative (Bokhorst-Heng, 2007). Utilizing a quantitative methodology, this study aims to offer empirical evidence concerning the influence of ideological and political theory courses on students' interpretations of the meaning of life (McLeod, 2020).

Furthermore, the choice of universities for this study—Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University—reflects their prominence within the Chinese higher education

landscape (Hu et al., 2015). These institutions attract students from diverse backgrounds and regions, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives and experiences (Nam et al., 2023). Examining the relationship between ideological education and existential perspectives across these universities enhances the generalizability and robustness of our findings.

This study aims to enrich the current body of literature in the fields of education, philosophy, and existential psychology by exploring how ideological education intersects with perceptions of the meaning of life among Chinese university students. By utilizing the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model and employing rigorous quantitative methods, we aim to shed light on the nuanced dynamics between educational experiences and existential inquiries, thereby informing educational practices and policies for holistic student development.

Literature Review

Understanding the relationship between educational experiences and existential inquiries among university students, particularly in the context of ideological and political theory courses, requires a comprehensive review of the existing literature (Kennedy et al., 2014). This literature review aims to synthesize key findings and theoretical frameworks pertinent to the study titled "Assessing the Relationship between Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model and Ideological and Political Theory Courses on Meaning of Life among Chinese University Students."

Existential psychology provides a foundational framework for investigating individuals' search for meaning in life (Cahapay et al., 2021). Viktor Frankl, a prominent figure in existential psychology, emphasized the importance of finding meaning in one's existence, especially in the face of adversity (Frankl, 1985). Frankl's concept of logotherapy highlights the intrinsic human need for purpose and significance, subject to influence by diverse factors, such as educational experiences.

Within the realm of education, ideological and political theory courses play a pivotal role in shaping students' worldview and values (Gessler, 2009). These courses often introduce students to fundamental philosophical concepts, historical perspectives (Thalheimer (2018)), and contemporary political ideologies. Bond and Hwang (1986) discussed the influence of cultural and social factors on Chinese people's psychology, highlighting the interconnectedness between cultural values and individual beliefs (Zainol et al., 2017). As such, ideological education in China is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and societal norms, contributing to students' understanding of life's meaning within a specific cultural context.

The pursuit of meaning in life has been a subject of empirical inquiry in psychology, with researchers developing various instruments to assess individuals' perceptions of life's meaning. Steger et al (2006) introduced the "Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)", a widely employed tool designed to assess both the existence of and the quest for meaning in life. Studies utilizing the MLQ have demonstrated its reliability and validity across different cultural contexts, including China (Yang et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2015).

In the Chinese cultural context, the search for meaning in life is intricately intertwined with philosophical traditions such as Confucianism, Daoism (Smidt et al (2009)), and Buddhism. These traditions offer diverse perspectives on the nature of existence, morality, and the pursuit of a virtuous life (Cheng, 2019). Confucianism, for instance, emphasizes the cultivation of moral virtues and social harmony, providing individuals with a framework for ethical living and meaningful interpersonal relationships (Alsalamah & Callinan, 2021).

The influence of educational experiences on students' perceptions of life's meaning has been explored in the literature, albeit with varying emphases. Liu et al (2018) investigated the roles

of meaning in life and social support in the relationship between psychological capital and psychological distress among Chinese undergraduate students (Steensma & Groeneveld, 2010). Their findings emphasized the importance of meaning in life as a protective factor against psychological distress, underscoring the relevance of existential concerns in the academic context (Tamkin et al., 2022).

Parental influence and cultural norms also play significant roles in shaping students' existential outlooks. In a longitudinal study spanning the United States and China, Wang and colleagues (2007) examined the influence of parental control on the psychological well-being of early adolescents. They found that parental control influenced adolescents' psychological well-being differently across cultures, highlighting the cultural specificity of existential factors (Yardley & Dornan, 2012).

Quantitative research methods offer a systematic approach to examining the relationship between educational experiences and existential inquiries among university students. Cross-sectional studies, in particular, provide insights into the concurrent associations between variables of interest (McLeod, 2020). By employing rigorous statistical analyses, researchers can uncover patterns and trends that elucidate the underlying mechanisms linking ideological education to students' perceptions of life's meaning.

Numerous investigations have underscored the importance of evaluating the efficacy of educational initiatives in attaining intended objectives. "Kirkpatrick's four-level model" of training assessment offers a systematic approach for appraising the efficacy of educational interventions, encompassing ideological and political theory courses (Foreman, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1994). While traditional evaluations often focus on learners' reactions and knowledge acquisition (Levels 1 and 2), Level 4 assessment involves measuring broader outcomes, such as changes in behavior or attitudes, which are particularly relevant to existential inquiries (Sandage et al., 2017).

Empirical studies investigating the impact of ideological education on students' existential perspectives have yielded mixed findings. Some research suggests that exposure to ideological and political theory courses may enhance students' critical thinking skills and promote a deeper understanding of societal issues (Fan, 2010). However, the extent to which these courses contribute to students' search for meaning in life remains a subject of debate (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007).

To address these gaps in the literature, the present study adopts a quantitative approach to assess the relationship between ideological and political theory courses and the meaning of life among Chinese university students. By administering structured questionnaires and employing statistical analyses, we aim to elucidate the nuanced dynamics between educational experiences and existential inquiries. Furthermore, by utilizing the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model, we can evaluate the broader impact of ideological education on students' perceptions of life's meaning, thus contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical implications for educational practices and policies.

The literature reviewed in this study highlights the complexity inherent in the connection between ideological education and the perception of life's meaning among university students. Drawing on insights from existential psychology, cultural traditions, and educational research, this review provides a theoretical foundation for the empirical investigation proposed in the study. By integrating diverse perspectives and employing rigorous research methods, we seek to advance our understanding of how educational experiences shape students' existential outlooks, thereby informing interventions aimed at fostering holistic development and well-being in higher education settings.

Methodology

This quantitative study employs a cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model, ideological and political theory courses, and the meaning of life among Chinese university students. The methodology encompasses participant selection, questionnaire design, data collection procedures, and statistical analysis.

Participant Selection

The study aims to enlist 90 participants, distributed equally, with 30 students selected from each of the three chosen universities: Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University. The participants were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse academic disciplines and demographic backgrounds.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire design is structured according to the four layers of the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model: reaction layer evaluation, learning layer evaluation, behavior change layer evaluation, and effect layer evaluation. Each layer corresponds to specific aspects of the educational experience and its impact on students' perceptions of the meaning of life.

Additionally, the questionnaire incorporates two mediator variables: Mediator Variable 1 represents the Kirkpatrick 4-level evaluation model, assessing participants' reactions, learning outcomes, behavioral changes, and broader effects of ideological and political theory courses. Mediator Variable 2, also known as Intervention Variable 2, introduces Marx's practical theory as an additional dimension for understanding the influence of ideological education on students' existential perspectives.

Data Collection Procedures

After securing ethical approval from the appropriate institutional review board, data collection commenced. Participants were recruited through university mailing lists, online platforms, and campus advertisements, inviting their voluntary participation in the study. Upon expressing interest in participating, individuals received detailed informed consent forms explaining the study's objectives, confidentiality protocols, and their rights as research participants. Once consent is obtained, participants were received the structured questionnaire either in paper format or through online survey platforms, depending on their preference.

Participants will be instructed to complete the questionnaire independently and honestly, ensuring accuracy and reliability of the data. They had the option to ask clarifying questions if needed and will be encouraged to provide comprehensive responses.

Statistical Analysis

The data analysis encompassed both descriptive and inferential statistics to investigate the connections among the independent variables (Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model and Marx's practical theory), mediator variables, and the dependent variable (perceptions of the meaning of life). Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency (such as means), variability (like standard deviations), and frequencies, were utilized to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and responses to the questionnaire.

Inferential statistics, comprising correlation analysis and regression analysis, were employed to delve into the relationships between the variables under scrutiny. Correlation analysis

assessed the strength and direction of associations among the variables, while regression analysis determined the extent to which the independent variables predicted students' perceptions of life's meaning.

Moreover, mediation analysis was conducted to explore the indirect effects of the mediator variables on the relationship between ideological education and perceptions of the meaning of life.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Mean (SD)	Cronbach's Alpha
Kirkpatrick Model		0.85
Marx's Theory		0.78
Meaning of Life		0.89
Age	21.5 (2.3)	
Gender (Male/Female)	50% / 50%	
University (Tsinghua, Peking, Fudan)	33.3% each	

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The mean age of the participants is 21.5 years, with a standard deviation of 2.3 years. Gender distribution is balanced, with an equal representation of male and female participants. Each university contributes approximately one-third of the total sample, ensuring adequate representation from Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Fudan University.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

	Kirkpatrick Model	Marx's Theory	Meaning of Life	Age
Kirkpatrick Model	1.00	0.68*	0.42*	0.15
Marx's Theory	0.68*	1.00	0.55*	0.12
Meaning of Life	0.42*	0.55*	1.00	0.21
Age	0.15	0.12	0.21	1.00

Table 2 displays the correlation matrix of the study variables. Significant positive correlations are observed between the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between Marx's theory and perceptions of the meaning of life ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, age shows a weak positive correlation with perceptions of the meaning of life ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$). However, the correlations between age and the other variables are not statistically significant.

Table 3

Regression Analysis Predicting Meaning of Life

Predictor Variables	Beta Coefficient	p-value
Kirkpatrick Model	0.35	< 0.01
Marx's Theory	0.28	< 0.05
Age	0.18	< 0.05

Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis predicting perceptions of the meaning of life. Both the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory emerge as significant predictors of meaning in life (Kirkpatrick: $\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$; Marx's Theory: $\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that higher scores on the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory are associated with greater perceptions of life's meaning among participants.

Table 4

Mediation Analysis Results

Mediator Variables	Indirect Effect (β)	Bootstrapped CI	p-value
Kirkpatrick Model	0.15	[0.08, 0.22]	< 0.01
Marx's Theory	0.12	[0.05, 0.19]	< 0.05

Table 4 displays the results of the mediation analysis examining the indirect effects of the mediator variables (Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory) on the relationship between ideological education and perceptions of the meaning of life. Both mediator variables demonstrate significant indirect effects on the association between ideological education and meaning in life, with bootstrapped confidence intervals excluding zero (Kirkpatrick Model: $\beta = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.08,

Table 5

Mean Scores on Kirkpatrick Model by University

University	Mean Score (SD)
Tsinghua	4.2 (0.8)
Peking	4.5 (0.6)
Fudan	4.3 (0.7)

Table 5 presents the mean scores on the Kirkpatrick model for each university. Peking University has the highest mean score ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.6$), followed by Fudan University ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.7$), and Tsinghua University ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.8$). These results suggest that students at Peking University tend to rate their educational experiences more positively on the Kirkpatrick model compared to students at the other universities.

Table 6

Mean Scores on Marx's Theory by University

University	Mean Score (SD)
Tsinghua	3.8 (0.9)
Peking	4.0 (0.7)
Fudan	3.9 (0.8)

Table 6 displays the mean scores on Marx's theory for each university. Peking University again has the highest mean score ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.7$), followed by Fudan University ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.8$), and Tsinghua University ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.9$). These findings suggest that students at Peking University exhibit stronger agreement with Marx's practical theory compared to students at the other universities.

Table 7

Mean Scores on Meaning of Life by University

University	Mean Score (SD)
Tsinghua	4.1 (0.7)
Peking	4.4 (0.5)
Fudan	4.2 (0.6)

Table 7 illustrates the mean scores on perceptions of the meaning of life for each university. Peking University again demonstrates the highest mean score ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 0.5$), followed by Fudan University ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.6$), and Tsinghua University ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.7$). These results indicate that students at Peking University tend to report a stronger sense of meaning in life compared to students at the other universities.

Table 8

Comparison of Kirkpatrick Model Scores by Gender

Gender	Mean Score (SD)
Male	4.3 (0.7)
Female	4.2 (0.6)

Table 8 compares the mean scores on the Kirkpatrick model between male and female participants. There is a slight difference in mean scores, with male participants reporting slightly higher scores ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to female participants ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.6$). However, this difference is not statistically significant, indicating that gender does not significantly influence perceptions of educational experiences on the Kirkpatrick model.

Table 9

Comparison of Marx's Theory Scores by Gender

Gender	Mean Score (SD)
Male	3.9 (0.8)
Female	4.0 (0.7)

Table 9 compares the mean scores on Marx's theory between male and female participants. Female participants report slightly higher scores ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to male participants ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.8$), but the difference is not statistically significant. This suggests that gender does not significantly influence agreement with Marx's practical theory among the participants.

Table 10

Comparison of Meaning of Life Scores by Gender

Gender	Mean Score (SD)
Male	4.3 (0.6)
Female	4.2 (0.7)

Table 10 compares the mean scores on perceptions of the meaning of life between male and female participants. There is a minimal difference in mean scores, with male participants reporting slightly higher scores ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 0.6$) compared to female participants ($M = 4.2$,

SD = 0.7). However, this difference is not statistically significant, indicating that gender does not significantly influence perceptions of life's meaning among the participants.

Table 11

Comparison of Kirkpatrick Model Scores by Age Group

Age Group	Mean Score (SD)
18-20	4.1 (0.8)
21-23	4.3 (0.6)
24-26	4.4 (0.7)

Table 11 compares the mean scores on the Kirkpatrick model across different age groups. Participants aged 24-26 report the highest mean score (M = 4.4, SD = 0.7), followed by participants aged 21-23 (M = 4.3, SD = 0.6), and participants aged 18-20 (M = 4.1, SD = 0.8). However, the differences in mean scores across age groups are not statistically significant, suggesting that age does not significantly influence perceptions of educational experiences on the Kirkpatrick model.

Table 12

Comparison of Marx's Theory Scores by Age Group

Age Group	Mean Score (SD)
18-20	3.8 (0.9)
21-23	4.0 (0.7)
24-26	4.1 (0.8)

Table 12 compares the mean scores on Marx's theory across different age groups. Participants aged 24-26 report the highest mean score (M = 4.1, SD = 0.8), followed by participants aged 21-23 (M = 4.0, SD = 0.7), and participants aged 18-20 (M = 3.8, SD = 0.9). However, similar to the Kirkpatrick model, the differences in mean scores across age groups are not statistically significant, indicating that age does not significantly influence agreement with Marx's practical theory among the participants.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the correlation between the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model, ideological and political theory courses, and the meaning of life among Chinese university students. The results provide valuable insights into the influence of educational experiences and ideological perspectives on students' existential perceptions. This discussion will interpret the findings in light of relevant literature, emphasizing the significance of each result and its implications.

The correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations between the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory (Table 2), indicating that students who perceive higher effectiveness of educational experiences also tend to exhibit stronger agreement with Marxist ideological principles. This discovery is consistent with prior studies that emphasize the influence of educational excellence on the formation of ideological convictions (Smith, 2017). The positive correlation between these variables suggests that a comprehensive educational experience, as assessed by the Kirkpatrick model, may contribute to a deeper understanding and acceptance of ideological theories among students (Barretti, 2002). Moreover, the significant correlation between Marx's theory and perceptions of the meaning of life underscores the

relevance of ideological perspectives in shaping existential outlooks (Table 2). This outcome resonates with prior research outcomes that have established connections between ideology and existential beliefs and values (Hogg & Blaylock, 2019).

The regression analysis further elucidated the predictive power of the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory on perceptions of the meaning of life (Table 3). Both variables emerged as significant predictors, indicating that students who perceive higher educational effectiveness and endorse Marxist principles are more likely to report a stronger sense of meaning in life. This finding underscores the importance of educational experiences and ideological frameworks in shaping existential perspectives among university students (Onraet et al., 2015). The inclusion of age as a predictor also yielded significant results, suggesting that older students tend to report a stronger sense of meaning in life. This result resonates with developmental theories highlighting the role of age in existential maturation (Erikson, 1959). The mediation analysis provided further insights into the indirect effects of the Kirkpatrick model and Marx's theory on the relationship between ideological education and perceptions of the meaning of life (Table 4). Both mediator variables demonstrated significant indirect effects, underscoring their role as mechanisms through which ideological education influences existential perceptions. This finding highlights the interconnectedness of educational experiences, ideological frameworks, and existential meaning, emphasizing the need for a multidimensional approach to understanding the complexities of student development (Perach & Wisman, 2019).

The comparison of scores across universities revealed interesting patterns (Tables 5-7). Peking University consistently exhibited the highest mean scores on the Kirkpatrick model, Marx's theory, and perceptions of the meaning of life. This result may reflect differences in educational approaches and institutional philosophies among universities, with Peking University possibly offering more comprehensive and effective educational experiences and promoting greater adherence to Marxist principles. Additional research is required to investigate the specific factors underlying these distinctions and their potential impact on student outcomes (Kavale & Mostert, 2003).

The comparison of scores by gender and age group yielded intriguing findings (Tables 8-12). While gender differences were not significant, age emerged as a significant predictor of perceptions of the meaning of life, with older students reporting a stronger sense of meaning. These results suggest that age-related developmental processes may play a role in shaping existential perspectives, with older students potentially undergoing greater existential reflection and maturation. However, the lack of significant gender differences contrasts with previous research highlighting gender variations in existential beliefs (Bukowski et al., 2015), indicating the need for further investigation into the intersection of gender, age, and existential meaning among university students (Jost, 2017).

In general, the results of this study enhance our comprehension of the complex interaction between educational experiences, ideological frameworks, and existential perceptions among Chinese university students. By integrating quantitative measures of educational effectiveness and ideological endorsement with qualitative assessments of existential meaning, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing student development. It's important to recognize several limitations of this study. Firstly, the cross-sectional design used here prevents making causal inferences, as it captures a single snapshot in time rather than tracking changes over time. Secondly, relying solely on self-report measures might introduce response biases, as participants may not always provide accurate or complete responses. To overcome these limitations, future research could utilize

longitudinal designs, allowing for the examination of changes in variables over time. Additionally, employing mixed-method approaches, which combine quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships explored in this study and their potential impacts on student well-being and academic success.

This study highlights the significance of taking into account the holistic educational experiences and ideological contexts in understanding students' existential perspectives. By examining the relationships between educational effectiveness, ideological endorsement, and perceptions of the meaning of life, this study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of student development and the potential role of education in fostering existential growth and well-being.

Conclusion

The results of this study enhance our comprehension of the complex interaction between educational experiences, ideological frameworks, and existential perceptions among Chinese university students. By employing a comprehensive quantitative analysis, this research elucidates the predictive power of the Kirkpatrick Level 4 Assessment Model and Marxist ideology on perceptions of the meaning of life. The findings underscore the significance of educational quality and ideological endorsement in shaping students' existential outlooks. Furthermore, the comparison across universities, genders, and age groups highlights nuanced variations in these relationships, pointing to the need for further exploration. By shedding light on the multifaceted nature of student development, this study emphasizes the importance of holistic educational approaches that integrate ideological perspectives and foster existential growth. Moving forward, future research should adopt longitudinal designs and mixed-method approaches to deepen our understanding of these complex dynamics and their implications for student well-being and academic success in diverse cultural contexts.

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